

# Pride, Narcissism and Prejudice

by FrenchCirce

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Summary: A Regency AU featuring our favorite characters. Love, drama and some humor au rendez-vous! Originally written for the Ghost Hunt Exchange 2016

## 1. Chapter 1

\_I recently took part in the Ghost Hunt Exchange held on tumblr, and wrote this piece as a present for Furiouskitten who requested a Regency AU. It was a very fun experience, I got some encouraging feedback, thus I decided to share it here. \_

\_Please note that I am perfectly aware that the characters' names are not consistent at all neither with the Regency period nor the country this story takes place in. But well, who cares? Call that the wonders of AU fanfiction!\_

\_This story is shamelessly inspired by the inimitable and wonderful Jane Austen's Pride and Prejudice. Any similarity is not coincidental at all.\_

\_I also beg forgiveness for the totally unoriginal title. I unfortunately suck at it.\_

\_Lastly, a huge thanks to Tiffo the chicken flea who edited the chapters. Quotation marks are evil.\_

\*\*\_And as usual, Ghost Hunt isn't mine.\_\*\*

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><p>It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. However little known the feelings or views of such a man may be on his first entering a neighborhood, this truth is so well fixed in the minds of

the surrounding families, that he is considered as the rightful property of some one or other of their daughters.<p>

The good people of the county of Merryton were blessed with such an arrival, a wonder in the form of a wealthy, young, possibly handsome and above all \_single\_gentleman.

Who had fallen prey to the gossip of every woman in the vicinity.

" â€|and I have heard that he rented the Netherfield estate on a whim!" said one of the aforementioned daughters.

"Mrs Hurst saw him riding his horse from her window, and said that he was remarkably handsome" happily provided another.

"We should consider such information with caution", wisely objected Masako Hara. "Mrs Hurst was obviously too far to see his features, and her vision is quite altered".

"But she said his riding was the most elegant", indignantly replied the unreliable source with an outraged pout.

"That may be true", proposed Mai Taniyama in a placating manner while serving tea diligently to the hosts. "He must be a well-bred gentleman after all."

"And whatever his face," wittily remarked Ayako Matsuzaki, "his wealth already makes him the most beautiful gentleman around!"

A concert of repressed laughter filled the morning room where young ladies were discussing this most recent and hot topic. The mothers, reunited in another corner of the place, rightfully glared at them for such improper behaviour, and then eagerly returned to the previous matter, already assessing the total income of the newcomer, the chances their daughters had to charm the man and silently scheming to be the first to be introduced while politely smiling to their peers.

Lady Hara, the hostess of this charming reunion, was sure her darling offspring would be the chosen one. Masako's perfect porcelaine white skin, delicate features and enthralling somber eyes made her the most beautiful marriageable girl in the county by far. Moreover she was poised and graced with a nice figure and elegant manners. What gentleman wouldn't fall for the owner of such remarkable assets? If her daughter were the first to meet him, no doubt she would be able to leave an unforgettable impression on the man! The Lady reminded herself to convince her dull husband to go visit their new neighbour as soon as good manners allowed it.

She scanned the faces of the other girls in the morning room by habit. She already knew by heart the good points and the defaults of any of them, and how much of a threat they could be.

Ayako Matsuzaki, for instance, was tall and possessed a very well-shaped body and a pretty face. But being twenty five she was the oldest, her youth and freshness slowly but surely drawing to an end. Her notoriously sharp tongue and arrogant behavior had also discouraged more than one suitor. She came from a renowned and wealthy family, though. That had to be put on her credit, and could give her an advantage if the man was seeking connections.

The other girls were as plain as day, they wouldn't be an hindrance to her plans to marry her daughter well. And Mai—The poor Mai Taniyama wasn't half as handsome as Masako. She wasn't totally plain either, her huge cinnamon eyes had been praised by the other sex on a regular basis. She was sweet and kind, though spectacularly clumsy on occasion. But her wild manners and spirit, added to her small dowry and lack of social connections, didn't make her a worthy opponent to her dear child.

Mai definitely wouldn't be a problem. If anything, Lady Hara was glad Lord Hara had taken the young orphan under his wing after her parent's tragic death. Unlike her husband and daughter, she wasn't particularly fond of the girl, but she had to admit she was well-bred enough to be good company for Masako, being the same age. Furthermore, the latter's beauty seemed to shine even more when placed next to the more common-looking orphan. Her presence would be beneficial on that matter.

Lady Hara smiled contentedly, sure of her daughter's future good fortune. Masako was twenty, a ripe age for marriage. Everything would go smoothly according to her will, unless—

She caught Lady Matsuzaki, Ayako's mother, scrutinizing the girls with a feverish gleam in her eyes, and surely similar thoughts. When their gazes met, they smiled coldly to each other, ready for the battle.

War was silently declared.

## 2. Chapter 2

\_Here we are for chapter 2! I hope you'll enjoy reading it as much as I did writing this. Constructive criticism is welcome, please do not hesitate to leave a review or shot me a PM if you feel like it!\_

\_All my thanks again to the very helpful and encouraging Tiffo the chicken flea.\_

\*\*\_As usual, Ghost Hunt isn't mine. I just play in the sandbox.\_\*\*

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><p>" and remember to introduce us right away!" claimed Lady Hara for the hundredth time. "We can't let the Matsuzakis be first!"<p>

"I will, my dear Lady, I will, reassured Lord Hara," debonaire as always.

The good man had realized very soon after his marriage that under her mask of beauty and sweetness, his spouse was a creature made of the toughest and coldest steel. He had since long developed the habit to comply to her wishes, knowing far too well that opposing her would make his life infinitely more tedious.

"The carriage is waiting for us, girls, he addressed the two young women patiently listening to the older one's preaching. You are

ready, I guess, because I don't see what you could add to so much beauty! Really, the poor man stands no chance, you will snatch his affection at once," he supplied kindly.

Before any of the two could thank him for his biased complement and give an appropriate and modest denial, Lady Hara retorted coldly.

"Lord Hara, we all know Masako is the most handsome girl and a natural beauty, there is no need to flatter her uselessly. And don't inflate Mai's ego, that would be cruel to the poor girl."

"But it was totally sincere!" objected the man good-naturedly.

Masako sent an apologetic glance to Mai who simply smiled back serenely. She was used to being reminded that she had less beauty, wealth, grace and manners than her foster sister, so she had learned to turn a deaf ear to these comments. Moreover, she was so thrilled to attend the first ball of the season and to meet the new owner of Netherfield and his suite, that she was determined to simply wipe any displeasure on her mind to enjoy the evening in its fullest. Even more since exciting news had leaked about the newest addition in the neighborhood.

The man's name was Yasuhara, he was said to be in his early twenties and to be the lucky owner of a large income of six thousand pounds. According to the rumors, he was of nice disposition, civil and liked to dance. That fact alone placed him in the good graces of Mai and Masako, who were always eager to be provided with some sort of entertainment. And balls were the most prized distraction among the countryside gentry's activities.

In addition to his ideal character, Yasuhara had had the marvelous idea to bring two other single friends with him, along with his older sister. Could he be more perfect?

They soon learned that perfect, he was. Thanks to Lady Hara's persistence and single-mindedness, they had been introduced to the charming young man upon their arrival and, to the utmost satisfaction of the former, before Lady Matsuzaki could set her paws on him.

To say the girls were delighted would be an understatement. The man didn't disappoint in the least, living up to their expectations. Not only was he open and civil but also really skilled at dancing! Masako had the pleasure to be invited immediately, and Mai's turn followed not too long after.

They chatted amiably and at the end of the dance, Mai was convinced that Yasuhara would be wonderful company to brighten up their dull days. He was obviously a cheerful, gentle and erudite person, and his slightly mischievous smile told her that he probably didn't lack humour nor liveliness.

His older sister, Madoka, was one of the same kind. She possessed gorgeous features, easy and unaffected manners and the most charming smile. The two siblings had blended among the locals with ease, and conquered the ball's hosts in the blink of an eye.

When the music came to a stop, Yasuhara escorted Mai back to her

friends. Masako and Ayako, who were was speaking animatedly, stopped altogether to greet the couple.

"Thank you for this lovely time, miss Taniyama," he bowed.

"The pleasure was all mine", responded Mai sincerely, mirroring his gesture in response. "But I am afraid your dancing skills are putting mine to shame."

Ayako snickered discreetly at the veracity of the statement. Her friend loved dancing, and always did it with enthusiasm and energy, but her clumsiness somewhat prevented her to be completely graceful. Nevertheless, Mai had never lacked partners during balls, her sunny disposition and open-mindedness compensating her lack of balance.

"I beg to differ," politely stated Yasuhara with an amused smile. "I can assure you that you have nothing to be ashamed of, since I have had the misfortune to dance with many partners whose skills and conversation were infinitely less enjoyable than yours."

The young woman flashed him a smile, marveling at his ability to flatter her without denying the obvious truth. An interesting and diplomatic person he was.

Suddenly Yasuhara caught sight of one of his friends and motioned for him to come. A tall dark figure silently joined their group under the curious scrutiny of the women, while the lively young gentleman theatrically greeted the newcomer.

"My dear ladies, I shall introduce you to my invaluable friend, Mr. Lin."

Mr. Lin's stone face barely reacted when presented, seemingly annoyed by the ambient cheerfulness and lack of decorum. His attire was formal and elegant, and most probably very expensive, betraying his affiliation to more elegant circles than their simple countryside party.

"What a waste of a handsome face," whispered Ayako to Mai half-joking, half-desolated. "His frown ruins it beyond fixing!"

Mai could only acknowledge Ayako's statement. Taller and sturdier than Yasuhara, Lin possessed chiseled features and stunning grey eyes. But, unlike his friend, he harbored haughty manners and a disdainful scowl, which gave him a frightening look. What a waste indeed!

After the formal introduction, said Lin bowed his heads stiffly and excused himself hurriedly. His presence had put a chill on the previous joyous atmosphere, and his leave was mostly felt like a relief by the ladies who exchanged meaningful glances: God help any woman sent out by her mother to pursue this man!

Mai's eyes followed Lin's tall frame retreating in a corner, wondering what circumstances could have brought close such a frigid man and the cheerful and friendly Yasuhara. What she saw puzzled her even more. Mr. Lin was now looking down on the people approaching him with an expression akin to contempt, obviously displeased to be part of the event. All he did was keep to himself, glaring coldly at the assistance through his silky black fringe. Even the overly brazen

Lydia Bennett didn't dare to behave like her usual foolish self in his vicinity. That, on the other hand, thought Mai with a wry smile, had to be put on the man's credit. Lydia was mostly insufferable, and seeing her subdued by Lin's mere presence was oddly satisfying.

Without the intimidating man's gloominess the chatting soon resumed, and Yasuhara finally invited Masako for a second dance. The young lady accepted graciously, apparently unaffected by the marked preference and great honour he was doing her.

"Lady Hara is probably delighted at this instant," remarked Ayako, eyes trained on the swirling couple. "Masako is already the favorite it seems."

"And the preference is mutual, I can tell," nearly squealed Mai in delight. "Did you notice? Her cheeks had the faintest blush when she accepted his hand!"

"That is an excellent thing, Yasuhara would be a good trade for a partner if she manages to secure his affection. But," frowned the young woman, "she shouldn't display so little emotion. Men are vain creatures who like to be flattered, after all."

Mai shook her head in disagreement.

"Masako is simply behaving like her usual self. You know she is moderate in everything. That is a part of her charm!"

"I am perfectly aware of that fact. But the dear man certainly is not. She is entitled to let him know how welcome his attentions are. If not, he may come to lose interest."

That said, she left to join her mother who was claiming her loudly, leaving a pensive Mai behind.

The girl was slightly worried after hearing her friend's advice. But after a glance at the couple dancing in the middle of the room her doubts vanished. Masako's face was serene, as usual, but her eyes were gleaming in pleasure, and the satisfied look her partner harbored was telling Mai he was anything but disinterested in the young lady in front of him.

The young orphan smiled, sincerely happy for her foster sister. She was convinced that the collected and poised Masako would be a perfect match for the rather flamboyant and outgoing Yasuhara. Moreover his wealth would allow her to live more than comfortably. What more could she wish for her?

Wandering around with a light spring in her step, Mai grabbed a glass of wine and sipped some delicately, waiting for the end of the dance, secretly hoping she would be asked for the next. Slightly bored, she let her gaze wander around the room and came abruptly to a stop when she took notice of an unknown face.

Â« Stunning Â» was all Mai could think at this moment. The owner of the remarkably handsome features, clad in dark clothes enhancing the blue of his eyes, was surrounded by several women who were blatantly fawning over his good looks. The lad was smiling seductively at them, arrogantly sure of his charm.

At first entranced by his outer appearance, his silky jet-black hair and elegant outfit, Mai rapidly became disenchanted. His eyes, albeit fascinating and beautiful, were frighteningly cold and calculating. The young lady felt herself frowning at him in defiance. Pretense wasn't something she considered lightly and, in spite of his smiling lips, she suspected him to be anything but friendly. At that precise moment the man's head turned in her direction and their eyes met for a few seconds, leaving the young woman breathless and light-headed.

His gaze had surprised her in its intensity. It had been piercing, serious, assessing and somehow, challenging. It had felt like he had seen right through her, and had dared her to, to what? She realized in horror that he had caught her looking at him with a scowl, betraying her distrust. Had she offended him by staring at him in suspicion? She cringed inwardly. Of course she had! Why couldn't she simply smile and behave like a polite and collected lady? He had probably been aware of her wariness, she knew she was as difficult to read as an open book. But she couldn't shake the feeling away: he was trouble. Handsome trouble, to be honest, but trouble nonetheless.

With the aim to put some more distance between the strange man and her flustered self, she turned heels abruptly to join any acquaintance she could find. Alas, her misfortune was complete that night. The calm and self-assured retreat she had planned suddenly metamorphosed in a disaster when she bumped into Lin in her haste, her glass of wine sloshing onto his dark waistcoat.

Mai froze when she realized what she had done, unsure of how to react. Her clumsiness had lead to an offense that was beyond repair. She tentatively offered an apology, but the words died in her throat at the almost hateful look Lin shot her. Her buzzing mind prayed fervently that her foolishness wouldn't affect Yasuhara's views on Masako when he would learn about this incident. Lin was one of his most valuable friends, and she had no doubt about the disastrous impression she was leaving to him.

In addition to Mai's already abyssal despair, Madoka appeared out of nowhere, closely followed by a gentleman who was no one but the dreaded stranger. And he was smirking, blatantly taking pleasure in watching her drowning in misery. The cinnamon-eyed girl screeched inwardly, cursing her bad luck. The evening couldn't take a worse turn, could it?

Madoka apparently assessed the situation at first glance. The color of the waistcoat thankfully concealed the wet stain from the view of potential distant onlookers, but it was still very noticeable up close. Unexpectedly, Yasuhara's sister offered Mai salvation, handling the debacle with intelligence and sparing both parties' wounded pride. She opened her fan to shield Lin's waist from view, and said with perfect natural:

"The evening is most pleasant, is it not, Miss Taniyama?"

Mai was unable to utter a word, too confused and agitated to think properly. Her complexion was probably a strange mix of pallor and redness, and she felt not too far from collapsing from mortification and embarrassment. Madoka went on loudly enough for everyone to hear,

unfazed by the lack of reply.

"But alas, I do feel a migraine coming. I regret it immensely, but I believe it would be safer for me to return to Netherfield to rest."

Then she turned to the tall wine-stained gentleman, smiling sweetly, unabashed.

"Would you mind escorting me, Mister Lin? I do feel a little faint."

Lin, to Mai's utmost astonishment, returned her smile warmly and graciously nodded, offering his arm. Leaving was the only acceptable option he had, considering the state of his dress, and Madoka, God bless her quick thinking, had just provided a plausible reason to do so. Mai sent a grateful look to the older woman who blinked back in understanding.

"Madoka, Lin, are you leaving yet?"

Yasuhara was coming their way, arm in arm with Masako. His sister, who had her back turned to them, turned her head slightly, still fanning herself in a very convincing manner.

"Yes, my dear brother, I feel a little faint and the gentleman here proposed to escort me back. But please don't leave on my account, Madoka added with a twinkle in her eyes, I would not dare to deprive you from such charming company."

Yasuhara grinned and was about to retort when he noticed the presence of the blue-eyed stranger, who had remained silent and partially hidden by Lin's huge frame.

"Ah, Shibuya, good thing you are here! I was in search for you! Let me introduce you to miss Masako Hara and miss Mai Taniyama!"

Before the formal introduction could be over, Mai, who was facing both Masako and the mysterious Shibuya, saw the former turn a ghastly shade of white when she set her eyes on the latter's face. Yasuhara felt his escort falter and asked immediately, alarmed, if she was unwell. The young lady rapidly regained her senses, but her complexion still remained disturbingly pale.

"I just feel a little tired after all this dancing," she said with a faint smile. "I am sure some fresh air would be enough to help me feel better."

Attractive cold blue eyes were set on the dark-haired woman. To Mai's displeasure, that Shibuya didn't appear fazed by Masako's distress. If anything, he was scrutinizing her in a manner that awfully resembled cold interest.

"Of course!" exclaimed Yasuhara immediately, unaware of the odd reaction of his friend. "Miss Taniyama, would you mind helping me to bring miss Hara to some quieter place? Lin, I am sorry, but I will leave my sister in your care."

Mai didn't pay any further attention to the rest of the party,

focusing on her friend's well-being. She was instantly by the dark-haired girl side, taking her arm to lead her near a window where she could have some cooler air, while Yasuhara was fetching a chair. She was worried about Masako's state, but also grateful for the distraction. She breathed much more easily now that she had put some distance between her, the -rightfully- furious Lin and the intriguing Shibuya.

"Do you feel better Masako?" asked Mai in concern after letting her seat with less grace than usual on a chair. "Maybe we should ask father to go back homeâ€|"

"Would you like me to advise your parents that you are unwell?" inquired Yasuhara as well.

"Please do not concern yourselves over me, I will be perfectly fine in a little while," shakily replied the young lady.

Indeed, after a few minutes Masako's face regained some colours, and, reassured that she wasn't on her death bed, Yasuhara reluctantly took his leave. Despite his worry, good manners didn't allow him to stay any longer, and he was expected to perform his social duties to the other guests. Mai stayed with her foster sister to keep her company and, now certain that she wasn't ill, to satisfy her nagging curiosity. She strongly suspected that her friend's state was somehow related to the appearance of the man named Shibuya. She broached the subject cautiously.

"Masako, I could not help but notice you wereâ€| uncomfortable when introduced to this Mr. Shibuya."

The dark-haired girl bristled imperceptibly, then fixed a particular point on the floor, seemingly absorbed in its contemplation.

"You are gravely mistaken, Mai. I was simply tired from the dancing."

Mai sighed softly. She wasn't naive enough to believe this lame excuse. Her instinct told her clearly that her friend was hiding something. Masako was skilled at hiding her emotions, but she was no match for her: after all these years spent together, Mai knew how to read her perfectly. The shock she had seen on her face was genuine, and it was clearly directed to the blue-eyed young man.

"Masako, I know what I saw. You were distressed just by looking at him."

"I assure you, I do not know this gentleman. And I was not distressed by his presence in the least. Please, she added in a rather desperate tone, do not press that matter further. Maybe I should ask father to go back home, after all, I do feel exhausted."

Mai nodded silently and decided to let Masako off the hook for the time being. She was obviously upset, and Mai didn't want to push her any further. She went in search of Lord and Lady Hara to fulfill her foster sister's wish, repressing heavy sighs. How could an evening begin so lovely and then end in such a dreadful manner?

The ball had begun with promises of fun, light gossip and laughter. And what had happened instead? She had made a fool of herself,

probably earning Lin's eternal resent in the process, offended that Shibuya before even knowing him, and her dear friend was refusing her trust. On top of all that now they were leaving before she could have had her fair share of dancing! Yes, the evening was definitively ending on an horrendous note. And for all that she knew, it was this Shibuya's entire fault.

### 3. Chapter 3

It's tough to write Regency style (especially if you're French)...feel free to tell me if you spot any mistake, or whatever!

**\*\*As usual, Ghost Hunt isn't mine (nor am I Jane Austen, though in my wildest dreams I wish I were as talented)\*\***

\* \* \*

><p>"Two times, Lord Hara, two times! And she was the <em>only</em> one he did that honor to."

"I am most aware of it, my dear," tranquilly responded the husband, eyes finally leaving the newspaper he was reading. "Didn't I tell you, girls, that you would be able to snatch the man?" he smiled to the younger ones. "I was not wrong, you charmed him as it seems."

"I knew such beauty couldn't go to waste!" emphasized lady Hara with unabashed pride. "Masako inherited it from me, after all, and I have had myself a fair share of admirers in my time. It really is a shame that she couldn't stay longer at the ball, though. It could have been the occasion to tie some bonds betweenâ€|"

Mai rapidly drowned out Lady Hara's babbling about how the evening should have ended, engrossed in her own thoughts. Since the ball, Masako had appeared on edge and preoccupied. Lady Hara had passed it as an infatuation for their new neighbour, clearly delighted that her splendid daughter was playing her part perfectly in her grand scheme to ensure a worthy engagement. But Mai wasn't convinced that this explanation was entirely satisfactory. Masako had obviously been under the charm of Yasuhara, she hadn't denied being attracted when Mai had teased her about that subject. But her nervousness was on another level. She was hiding something, and Mai was determined to unravel the truth: she wouldn't let her dear friend worry without giving her support if she could be of any help.

The young woman was pondering about the best way to convince her friend to confide when the breakfast was interrupted by the maid.

"Yes, Jenkins?" asked Lady Hara in her usual harsh tone.

The poor servant, still intimidated by the lady even after a full year of employment, mumbled hesitantly that miss Masako had received a letter. The latter immediately perked up at those words, revealing a rosy blush on her cheeks, and motioned to the maid to give her aforementioned correspondence.

The entire family waited expectantly for the the maid to leave so that Masako could read the missive out loud.

"It is from Miss Madoka, informed the black-haired girl, scanning the letter with curiosity. She writes that the men have left Netherfield for the day, and that she hopes that Mai and I would be able to visit this afternoon and have dinner with her, to help her out of, I quote, 'her miserable solitude'."

"The man is interested in you, here is the proof! He surely had asked her to invite you. What a wonderful idea! Being better acquainted with your future sister-in-law is absolutely necessary, a woman is never prepared enough to enter another family."

Masako and Mai shared an exasperated glance and resisted the urge to roll their eyes. Lady Hara was so used to rule as a queen in her household that she didn't even consider the possibility that Yasuhara may not act accordingly to her plans. Her unwavering confidence was somehow infuriating, but the girls knew that patience was the best policy to deal with the delusional Lady.

"Papa, would that be alright if we went?"

"Of course my dear. This miss Madoka is more than respectable, and I can picture very well that a young lady like herself would provide more entertaining company for you than your mother and I," he added, wincing as he heard his wife's loud scoffing. "Mai and you may go as you wish."

"Thank you sir!" heartily exclaimed the girls in unison.

Mai was grateful to Madoka for her invitation. The gesture was clearly a confirmation that Yasuhara's sister didn't hold her completely responsible for the total fiasco at the ball, and that it hadn't affected her opinion about Masako. That was an immense relief, Mai wouldn't have been able to forgive herself if she were to be an obstacle to her friend's happiness.

"That is very unfortunate that you will not be to see Yasuhara," considered Lady Hara. "I can not blame you for not seeking the company of the two other gentlemen, though, their manners are positively horrible. This Lin was insufferable, acting so mighty!"

"He was polite, if not very friendly," nuanced Lord Hara. "He comes from an old and distinguished family, he is Lady Luella Davis's nephew if I am not mistaken. Our country ball was certainly very different from the circles he is used to frequent."

"I beg your pardon? We are of distinguished descent \_ourselves\_," snorted his wife, and our circles count many fine people. "No, I tell you, he was just unbearably prideful!"

Mai and Masako stayed mute, secretly glad that the frowning gentleman hadn't caught the eye of their mother. If she were to try to set up one of them with Lin—They shivered at the thought.

"Even Lady Matsuzaki agreed that she wouldn't have him as a son-in-law! And the other one, that Shibuya! He is handsome for sure, and I heard that he is very rich, richer than Yasuhara even, but his behavior was the most suspicious. He was introduced to many ladies, was most civil and charmed them indeed, but did not invite even one

to dance! What sort of gentleman does not dance at a ball, I ask you!"

"It was strange indeed," admitted Lord Hara. "But he may simply dislike dancing."

"No proper young man dislikes dancing," declared sententiously his wife. "I do not think of him very highly, he seems to be a fickle young one. Mrs Hurst told me that he engaged a conversation with her daughter, spoke with her for some minutes and then ignored her completely for the rest of the evening! The girl is notoriously plain, but he was the one who sought her, after all. Another prideful one for sure, he and Lin make a fine pair!"

"Mother," pleaded Masako, "do not forget that they are Mr Yasuhara's friends. They surely possess good traits that we are not aware of. Maybe we just misunderstood their intentions. It would be more charitable to give them the benefit of the doubt."

"We are not to see any of them at Netherfield today, so it is not worth worrying ourselves about their character. We should simply enjoy Yasuhara's presence in the next ball and ignore the others as much as we could," declared Mai, slightly annoyed.

If anything, the brown-haired girl was relieved that the men were to be absent. She didn't look forward to seeing Lin or Shibuya, and was determined to avoid them as much as good manners allowed it. If Masako's agitation was any indication, despite her kind words she wasn't keen on meeting them either.

"That is right, you will not see them—how bothersome. Maybe we can arrange that—"

Lady Hara's eyes shone with a strange gleam, immediately raising suspicion in the young ladies' minds. She was evidently scheming something, and that never was a good sign.

"When could the carriage be ready, sir?" asked Mai in an attempt to distract her foster mother from her conniving thoughts. We have to let miss Madoka know when we are supposed to arrive.

"Carriage? Nonsense. You will go by horse," replied Lady Hara in her husband's place, a satisfied smirk plastered on her face.

"By horse? But the rain is threatening to fall any moment!" cried Masako, horrified.

"The harness is needed elsewhere, am I wrong, Lord Hara?"

The good man knew better than to contradict his wife. He acquiesced, though sporting a slightly disapproving look.

"That is right, dear. The tenant told me it was needed in the fields. But letting the girls go with that weather—"

"Shall we refuse the invitation, then, Sir?"

"Absolutely not! You will go by horse, as you were told. This will prevent you to come back this evening because of the rain, and you will have the chance to see Yasuhara tomorrow."

"Mother, I cannot believe you are serious," replied Masako in a strangled voice.

"I am, and you will do as I say. Now, send your reply to miss Madoka this instant. And do not disappoint me," she added in threateningly. "This man is the best chance you have of marrying well."

Masako nodded wordlessly, but her tensed features were betraying her sentiment about her mother's request. Mai squeezed her companion's hand in a comforting manner, hoping she would take solace in her presence. At least, she would stand beside her in this mess.

#### 4. Chapter 4

\_Here is chapter 4. Hope you enjoy!\_

\*\*\_As usual, Ghost Hunt isn't mine\_\*\*

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><p>Lady Hara would have been proud of her daughter. Not only Masako had to spend the night at Netherfield to avoid the rain pouring heavily outside, but she and Mai had arrived so drenched at the mansion that they managed to caught a cold, thus prolonging their stay.<p>

Madoka had been the most charming and entertaining host, and a very considerate friend. When it had become evident that her guests were beginning to fall ill after their ride in the rain, she had immediately made arrangements so that they would be provided warm rooms and beds, and nourishing catering to help them overcome their cold. She had even apologized for not being able to send them home, the men having use of her only mean of transportation for their own journey. Although she had been obviously surprised by the girls' state when they had passed the Netherfield's gates, she had tactfully avoided any remark about the foolishness of coming over by horse in an uncertain weather, to Mai and Masako's relief. The two had been reluctant to follow their mother's orders, and felt now utterly ashamed of this deliberate attempt to impose on their caring host. Madoka's levelheadedness, elegance and generosity was making the pettiness of Lady Hara's scheme even more blatant.

Following the day of their arrival, after a good night's rest, Mai's health had been completely restored. Masako, however, was of a far more delicate constitution, and had begun to show alarming symptoms. The same evening, the local doctor was fetched, and Mai and Madoka were patiently waiting in the salon for his diagnosis when the men came back from their trip.

The ladies soon heard the worried voice of Yasuhara booming through the hall.

"Madoka? Are you alright? I saw the doctor's chaise in front of the main door and I was wondering if you wereâ€|"

The man stopped short when he realized his sister was seated next to a familiar face, and Lin, who was following behind in large strides, nearly bumped into him. Shibuya appeared the next second, his eyes

widening when he took notice of Mai, but his schooled features betraying nothing of his thoughts about her presence.

The two women got up from their couch to greet the men, and Mai was startled to see relief flooding Lin's face when her host explained why the doctor actually was at the mansion. Could it be that he was worried about Madoka? Infatuated maybe? As surprising as it was, the somber man had a heart, after all.

Yasuhara, on the other hand, became frantic when he heard about Masako's state, and was already speaking about sending word to their physician in London. Mai had to calm him down, assuring that Dr. Lambert's reputation was excellent, that he had watched over her friend's health since the day she was born and was perfectly able to handle what probably was a simple cold.

Just on cue, the old doctor entered the room to release Yasuhara from his anguish. The diagnosis wasn't worrying. The young lady was ill, her fever was high and she needed rest above all, but her life wasn't endangered in any way. A few days of bed rest and some medication, and she would be as good as new.

After profusely thanking the physician, who promised to come back the next day to check on his patient, Yasuhara went to inform his house staff that the guests were prolonging their stay, and proposed to Mai to send word to the Haras, so that they do not worry uselessly about their daughter and provide the two ladies with necessary supplies.

"Yes, thank you very much, sir. That would be very kind of you," replied Mai with a sincere smile.

"Miss Hara is resting, we should let her get some sleep for now. But I suggest we keep her company for dinner later," said Madoka kindly. "I am sure she would welcome some distraction, and your presence will certainly help her feel better at home."

Mai opened her mouth to express her gratitude, but a light coughing came out instead, to her utmost embarrassment. Madoka immediately rang for a maid.

"Oh dear, I forgot you were unwell yourself, are you feeling cold? Molly," she addressed the servant, "please, fetch a shawl for Miss Taniyama. And a cup of tea."

"I am fine, I assure you," Mai lied. "And I am really sorry that our foolhardy ride caused you trouble."

"Nonsense! I was the one who insisted you visit. I regret immensely that you and Miss Hara have fallen ill because of my selfishness. However, I would be lying if I were to say I do not appreciate having some female companionship under this roof," Madoka replied.

The efficient Molly rapidly brought a thick shawl and a scalding cup of black tea, and helped Mai to settle in a couch. Unexpectedly, Lin and Shibuya stepped aside from the hearth to let her benefit from its warmth. She was touched by the gesture, and her defiance against them plummeted. These people were undoubtedly considerate towards Masako and her, despite the fact that she had done nothing but offend them since their encounter. The frown appearing on Lin's features each

time their eyes met told her that she wasn't entirely forgiven, and the smug handsomeness of Shibuya was still infuriating. But the kindness of their actions singularly contrasted with the cold personality she had pictured them with.

" I thought ladies had more discernment than riding haphazardly in this weather. I guess I gave them too much credit," suddenly said a low velvety voice.

Mai blushed to the roots in irritation, her previous magnanimity toward the blue-eyed man now totally forgotten. The rude comment earned Shibuya a vicious look that didn't make him falter in the least.

"Mr Shibuya, I beg you not to dismiss my entire sex for my one error of judgement. Besides, people are entitled to learn through their mistakes, are they not?"

"People in general, certainly, miss Taniyama. But my brains works differently than yours, I hardly make what you call mistakes. That is why I find it hard to forgive stupidity and ignorance," agreed the man with total aplomb.

Mai's own eyebrow twitched in annoyance. Could this man be even more full of himself? What an insufferable narcissist! She decided to dub him Naru the narcissist on the spot. But the young woman was even more disturbed by the fact that despite his rudeness, she still found him so very attractive. It was the first time she heard his voice, and she had to admit it was very seductive, matching his stupidly beautiful features. Having so many assets was totally unfair.

"I beg to differ, mister Shibuya. I personally find that unkindness is a much more unforgivable trait. But I guess we are partial to our own faults," she added scathingly.

"Indeed, miss Taniyama. Ordinary minds are blind to their defects."

The brown-haired girl saw red. Ordinary minds? Who did that Shibuya think he was? And how dare he persistently call her stupid?

"I am very sorry that my ordinary self is unable to catch up with such perfection that you seem to be the embodiment of. I do make mistakes, I admit, so am I prone to forgive those of my peers. And if I recall correctly, pride is a sin, and forgiveness a virtue. I may have found your biggest fault there, Mr Shibuya."

The young gentleman raised an eyebrow, before a smirk grew on his ridiculously beautiful face.

"You are mistaken. It is not pride on my part, I was merely stating a fact."

"If you say so, I rely upon your word. But that fantastic brain of yours is regretfully unable to prevent you from being disdainful."

" It is only logical that I look down on something which is inferior in quality."

"Looking like Adonis and being smarter than average does not give you

the right to act so prideful!" she flared.

"So you think I am handsome?" the young man stated with aloofness.

The brown-haired girl gasped, realizing what exactly she had said during her bout of temper.

"Isn't it not that everyone's thinking? Half of the ladies at the ball were fawning over your looks," she snorted.

"Indeed. They have good taste."

"That is, if they like conceited characters, Naru."

Suddenly the air grew cold. The nickname had escaped her lips without notice, and Mai gulped nervously. Even the unflappable Lin seemed shocked, and Shibuya's features hardened considerably. His voice came out tense and dry as he asked almost menacingly:

"Where did you hear that?"

"Uh?" was all Mai uttered, confused. "So you mean I am not the only one thinking of you as a narcissist? Well, that was to be expected with an attitude like yours!"

"Naru like narcissist?" Madoka exhaled in what resembled relief.

An uncomfortable silence ensued, finally broken by the older lady.

"Well, it suits you, Shibuya," she mocked in an obvious attempt to cut down some of the tension. "Miss Taniyama saw through your biggest imperfection."

"Is that so?" murmured the young gentleman, still miffed.

Nevertheless, his stiff stance relaxed significantly, and the atmosphere definitely took a lighter turn when Yasuhara came back into the room obliviously cheerful, followed by his footman announcing that dinner was ready.

Shibuya walked to stand in front in a dumbfounded Mai, and offered her his arm in the most charming manner.

"Miss Mai," he simply said with relaxed familiarity, his unreadable blue gaze set on her.

The young lady accepted his arm, eyes wide, wondering what on earth had just happened. One moment they were verbally sparring heatedly, then this weird moment occurred, and the second after he behaved like they were old acquaintances. And he called her Mai! What exactly was going on his mind?

The dazzling man was really full of contradictions and mysteries. And as irritating as it was, she felt herself far too interested. Damn her curiosity. It would probably be the end of her.

## 5. Chapter 5

\_Thanks a lot to those who have reviewed, favorited or followed this story! It's nice to see some people enjoy my work :)\_

\_\*\*As usual, Ghost Hunt isn't mine.\*\*\_

\* \* \*

><p>The men were tired from their journey, so the dinner went quietly and was over early. The ladies soon excused themselves to retire in Masako's room, but not before promising Yasuhara repeatedly to convey his best wishes for a quick recovery.<p>

They diverted the sufferer with story-telling, small talk and Madoka provided witty descriptions of the last London ball she was at, mocking with spirit the ridiculous personas she met there. After a while Masako shown some signs of tiredness, and the girls left her to rest. The evening was still young, so they went back downstairs to converse a bit more. Mai grabbed this opportunity to stench her thirst for clues about the mysterious men inhabiting this mansion. Maybe she would get the reason behind her friend's recent strange behaviour.

"Are you well acquainted with Mr Lin and Mr Shibuya" asked the cinnamon-eyes girl as innocently as she could. "I understood Mr Lin was a good friend of your brother, but I did not had theâ€|pleasure," she added after hesitating a bit too long, "to hear about Mr Shibuya."

Madoka stared at Mai for a second, seemingly pondering something, and then, without warning, stifled a heartily laugh.

"Yes, I have known them both for very long. Since childhood, actually. And I have to say, I am amazed at how well your are handling them."

"How well?" Mai gasped, mouth inelegantly open in shock. "You cannot be serious! From the first time I met them, I have done nothing but offend them in one way or another. Do I have to remind you that I have drenched Lin with \_wine\_? And I called Shibuya a \_narcissist\_ just today?"

"I recall it perfectly dear. The incident with the wine was problematic indeed. But what I find amazing is that you do not recoil in fear seeing Lin, or try to avoid him like a pest. Same goes for Shibuya. It is quite rare to see him actually argue with someone, a woman even more! He generally dismisses people he does not deem of importance. And believe me, there are very few he does not ignore."

"So I should feel privileged being the aim of his sarcastic comments? I do not think I am in a very enviable situation."

The older woman sighed in defeat, sadness creeping on her usually sunny smile.

"Lin and Shibuya are kind-hearted persons, truly. They simply are not used to interacting with large groups of people, their dry behaviour

is the result of a certain shyness. I was glad to see you were not deterred by their attitude. Unfortunately," she added mournfully, "most people are."

"Well I will not say I am not bothered by their hum, rough character, but even I can see they do not intend harm."

Mai's words were spoken with sincerity. After all, Lin and Shibuya were close friends with Yasuhara and his sister, who were undoubtedly good people. That had to be put to their credit. Madoka brightened significantly at her words, and grinned playfully.

"Exactly! And to be honest, Naru is a narcissist, it was very inventive of you. The nickname will stick for sure."

"Oh I beg of you," groaned Mai, "do not remind me of that bout of foolishness! How I came up with it is a mystery, and I am ashamed of my brazenness."

"No, no, it was truly brilliant! He needs to be tormented a little, his ego can take that much."

"Do you think he will retaliate?" asked the girl in concern. "It was most rude of me, and he would have every right to embarrass me. Oh, what have I done?" she cried in desperation.

Madoka flashed an enigmatic smile, and giggled.

"Oh, I can tell he will."

When she saw her guest pale significantly at her words, she added hastily:

"But do not worry dear, he will not harm you or your reputation in any way. If anything," she muttered, "both of you may win at this game."

After this cryptic comment, the lady oriented the conversation towards safer grounds.

"Tell me, miss Taniyama, shall I expect your presence at the Matsuzakis' ball next week?"

"If Masako's recovery is complete at that time, absolutely. Are you going, too?"

"Of course I will! The gentlemen here are often on the road, I would die of boredom if I did not have this sort of distraction."

That statement caught Mai's attention immediately.

"Are they frequently absent? Why rent Netherfield, then? It may have been more pleasant for you to stay in London with your friends," asked the girl in astonishment.

Madoka stiffened imperceptibly, a somber and sour expression veiling her features. She wiped it the next second, leaving Mai wondering if she had dreamt it. Another mystery shrouding the already perplexing people of Netherfield, she thought.

"Shibuya had some business to take care of in the vicinity. As his cousin, Lin came to assist. And my brother, being the enthusiastic friend he is, decided it would be delightful to enjoy the charm of the countryside as the owner of such an estate while helping."

"I see—does he consider settling down here definitely?"

"He may, if something catches his interest. But for the time being, it is only temporary."

Mai felt a cold grip tighten her heart. Was Masako aware of the fact that their time with the Yasuharas was limited? She was certain her friend was very fond of the young gentleman, and according to his recent behaviour, he wasn't indifferent to her either. But would Masako be enough of a reason for him to stay?

For the first time, Mai felt unsure about the future. After a single ball she had made assumptions about Yasuhara's intentions toward Masako, most probably influenced by their mother's belief. But what did she really know about any of the Netherfield's occupants? How long would their business in the county keep them around? What would she and Masako do if they were to leave?

Mai was sure she wouldn't want to return to her dull days, even if that meant enduring Shibuya's annoying comments and Lin's harsh stare. The Yasuhara siblings were more than enough to make up for it. And Masako—her friend wasn't the type to form attachments, especially romantic ones. She always appeared cool and composed, but Mai knew that, despite appearances, her friend had a soft and romantic heart, and was secretly hoping to marry for love. Her mother had a much more pragmatic view on that matter, and to prevent being caught in a convenience marriage the black-haired girl had become a master at deflecting any serious attempt of wooing. But now, for the first time in years, she was showing affection to a member of the other sex! And the man seemed to reciprocate the feeling. It would be unfair if she didn't obtain the happiness she deserved—

Mai stifled a yawn, suddenly feeling exhausted, overwhelmed by her uncertainties. It didn't go unnoticed, as Madoka exclaimed:

"Oh, miss Taniyama, the evening is getting late! I am really sorry, I had no intention of keeping you awake for so long."

"Please do not be. Conversing with you was most enjoyable."

"I am glad you think so. Nonetheless, we should retire and get some rest."

Mai agreed and bid farewell to her host, her head full of love affairs, mysteries, and strangely, cold blue eyes.

## 6. Chapter 6

Thank you all for your support! And now, let's get to  
business!

\*\*As usual, I don't own Ghost Hunt\*\*

\* \* \*

><p>The feeling was peculiar. All heaviness was leaving her body, and the fading colours of the world were replaced by a blinding light. She closed her eyes momentarily, only to find a bright blue sky when she opened them again. The warmth of a summer breeze was caressing her cheeks gently, and the thick grass of the hill delicately tickled her bare feet. She should have been bothered by her state of dress; she was only wearing her nightgown in the wild, open field. But she didn't felt embarrassed in the least, walking among the the daisies, her tressed hair batting her back with each step.<p>

She let her gaze wander curiously around her. The landscape wasn't familiar, that she could tell. The soft grassy hills covered with bright-colored wild flowers were nothing out of the ordinary, as they could be found nearly everywhere in the English countryside, but the small circle of huge rectangular stones erected in the middle of them certainly wasn't.

One of them had an odd shape, looking like a gigantic slanted granite glove emerging from the soil. It was definitely a unique sight, and she had no recollection of ever having been there before. So, where was she, and what was she doing here exactly?

She had the strange impression that she wasn't alone, even if nobody was responding to her inquiring shouts. Finally, she noticed that under the shadow of glove-shaped stone stood a dark masculine silhouette. She aimed for it, relieved to find someone, anyone, in this place. She must have been walking fast, because she reached the man in a matter of seconds, his face coming closer in a zooming motion to reveal silky jet-black hair and blue eyes. Her own grew wide when she realized who it was.

"Naru," she whispered in shock.

He didn't reply, and Mai knew she was dreaming because he looked at her with a gentle smile gracing his features. A dazzling one, that seemed to lighten his eyes and that made her heart skip a beat. His gaze wasn't piercing and intense as usual, but warm and somewhat sad. It was unsettling, seeing him so open and vulnerable. And this sadnessâ€¦She felt her eyes prickle with unshed tears. Why did she want to cry so badly?

Naru offered her his hand with a soft expression, and she took it hesitantly, trembling slightly. He gave her a reassuring smile, that managed to appease her anxiety a bit. Despite the summery weather, the idyllic landscape of green grass and blooming flowers, Mai felt nervous. Something wasn't natural. The man wasn't behaving like himself to begin with, then her attire was hardly appropriate and she was barefoot, but she didn't feel any cold or physical pain walking on the uneven ground. It was a dream, she knew, but the nagging eery feeling of abnormality didn't subside. The warmth of Naru's hand was soothing though, and she relaxed while they walked silently to reach the top of the highest hill. The gentleman then stopped and pointed insistingly at a nearby lake.

Mai tried to engrave the picture of the place into her mind. The stones, the hills, the lake, the nearby village's church she was able to spot in the distance. Something was telling her it was of the utmost importance. She turned to Naru, her brown gaze inquiring, her features etched in a serious and concentrated frown.

"The lake? Is that what you wanted to show me?"

Shibuya nodded gravely, and smiled gently a last time before letting go of her hand.

As soon as the skin contact was broken, the heaviness of her body returned, and the sunny light was consumed with darkness. Blue eyes were watching her with kindness and regret, and the last thing she saw were perfect lips murmuring a quiet "Goodbye".

\* \* \*

><p><em>AN:The circle of stones described in this chapter actually exists! If you want to see what it really looks like (my description was rather sparse), just google "Stanton Drew". It is located near Bristol, in Somerset, England.<em>

End  
file.